

A
Private
World

Dickinson

Japanese and
Chinese Art
from the
Kelvin Smith
Collection

The Cleveland
Museum of Art
September 14-
November 13
1988

August 11, 1988

A PRIVATE WORLD: JAPANESE AND CHINESE ART
FROM THE KELVIN SMITH COLLECTION
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Kelvin Smith's admirable collection of Japanese and Chinese art, which Mrs. Smith has given to The Cleveland Museum of Art in her husband's memory, will be on view in the upper special exhibition gallery from September 14 through November 13, 1988. The paintings, prints, and sculptures on exhibition represent the generous gift of more than 200 works of art. After this special exhibition, objects in the Smith gift will be on continual, rotating display, as are all works in the Museum's distinguished collection of Asian art. Aided by Mr. Smith's bequest establishing a fund for acquisition, the Museum continues to collect in areas consistent with his interests, which ranged widely and sensitively over the art of Japan and China.

A founder with his brothers of the Lubrizol Corporation, which established facilities in Japan, Mr. Smith was first intrigued by the woodblock prints of Kiyoshi Saito, one of the major printmakers of twentieth-century Japan. Saito's work embodies the traditional Japanese love of materials and their sympathetic use; the Smith gift to the Museum includes nearly the complete oeuvre of Saito.

From these modern prints, Kelvin Smith moved easily to the traditional masters of the Japanese woodblock print, of whom Hokusai and Hiroshige are perhaps best known, and then to paintings by seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century masters of ukiyo-e, "pictures of the Floating World." Rather than focus

exclusively on Japanese prints, as most Western collectors have done, Mr. Smith recognized that prints were only part of an ukiyo-e artist's work. Paintings became one of his overriding interests and constitute the greatest distinction of this collection, which is perhaps unique in the United States in being almost equally divided between prints and paintings.

The term ukiyo-e, originally a Buddhist concept of the transitory and insubstantial nature of human existence, was transformed during the seventeenth century in an ironic shift of meaning to refer to the pleasures of human life, while retaining some of its earlier connotation of impermanence. The pleasures were especially those associated with the new entertainment and brothel districts of the major Japanese towns, so the term ukiyo-e--"images of the Floating World" of fleeting human pleasures--is in an important sense defined by subject matter.

Its subjects are the courtesans, actors, and fashionable men and women who frequented the amusement districts, the most famous of which was the Yoshiwara on the outskirts of Edo (present-day Tokyo). At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the new capital Edo was a minor castle town; within a hundred years it was a thriving city with a million inhabitants, an unprecedented urban scale with great economic and social consequences for Japanese society. The rise of a money (in place of a rice-based) economy meant the emergence of a rich merchant class which, nonetheless, remained at the bottom of the social order. Forbidden by sumptuary laws to flaunt their wealth and by their low status from any significant participation in public affairs, the merchants could concentrate their considerable energies only on trade and the pursuit of pleasure. They sought out novel and often lavish entertainment in these amusement--called "flower and willow"--precincts,

within which strict Japanese rules of etiquette, taste, and social stratification prevailed.

This combination of Japanese tradition and daring novelty appealed to Kelvin Smith's taste. His collection included many images of the courtesans whose legendary beauty and accomplishments placed them at the top of the hierarchy of the new districts. Such a beauty graces Teisai Hokuba's two-fold screen painting, Standing Beauty Reading a Letter, or Suzuki Harunobu's color woodblock print Young Woman Looking at a Pot of Pinks. Kitagawa Utamaro's color woodblock print, The Courtesan Takigawa of Ogiya, is the most striking and famous image in the series "Seven Aspects of Komachi in the Green Houses"; the title of the series refers to Ono no Komachi, the fabled ninth-century poetess, and to the brothels, sometimes called green houses or towers, a witty and unexpected juxtaposition of old and new that is characteristic of Japanese thought and imagery.

While these images appear to be portraits, they are more properly seen as idealized figures or types. One that appears to be an actual portrait (but was painted many years after the death of its subject) is titled Portrait of Kinokuniya Bunzaemon. As one of the first of Edo's millionaire merchants, Bunzaemon was famous for his extravagance, confirmed in some measure by the sitter's girth and the lavish array of food spread before him. Perhaps the absence of grossness can be ascribed to the great delicacy with which the ink and light colors are applied to the silk.

Not all ukiyo-e paintings were concerned primarily with the amusement districts. They included a whole range of contemporary pastimes and genre scenes. A superb example is Tamara Suiō's Lover's Visit, with its air of courtly refinement. The artist's most celebrated work, it pictures elegant

women watching a young man approach; the breeze moving through the picture is a visual metaphor for the stir his arrival causes, made visible in subtle curves of ink and color on silk.

Landscapes have long been among the most popular images in Japanese art, capturing places which the Japanese revere. Katsushika Hokusai's color woodblock print The Surface of Lake Misaka in Kai Province is from his famous series, "Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji." From a series equally beloved by Japanese and Western collectors, Utagawa Hiroshige's "Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido," comes the color woodblock print Evening Snow at Kambara.

The fierce portrait of the nineteenth-century actor Ichikawa Denjuro VII as Kan Shoji, by Gototei Kunisada, is a color woodblock of one of the great Kabuki performers, a pruned branch clenched between his teeth. A delicate scene on a hanging scroll, Pheasant and Grasses, an ink and color painting on paper, is linked by seals to the great Rimpa master Ogata Korin (1658-1716). In the extraordinary contrast these two images provide, each testifies to Kelvin Smith's understanding of the range of Japanese art.

The exhibition includes--beyond the ukiyo-e material--Japanese ink paintings of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries; Chinese paintings from the Song through Qing dynasties; a selection of Saito's prints; and paintings purchased by the Museum from Mr. Smith's bequest. Some of the prints are likely to be replaced during the show to protect them from prolonged exposure to light and to enable visitors to see several images from each series and as wide a selection as possible of works in the Smith gift.

Five Song album leaves are excellent examples of the taste for small, intimate scenes favored by the Song court. Modest but sharply focused views of the world, these scenes perfectly capture the Song taste for "poetry within

painting," an achievement to which Kelvin Smith responded. Among these Song works are Bird on a Flowering Branch and Willows. The Japanese paintings, equally revealing of an inclination toward the private, restrained rendering of nature and experience, include Mandarin Duck and Aged Pine.

The September issue of the Museum Bulletin serves as the catalogue for A Private World. Contributors are Sherman E. Lee, former director and chief curator of Asian art at the Museum, his successor in the curatorial post, Michael Cunningham, and Donald Jenkins, former director of the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum and now its curator of Asian art. Dr. Cunningham, with the aid of Jean Cassill, administrative assistant for Chinese and Japanese art, organized this first special exhibition of the Smith gift. The exhibition, its related educational programs and activities, and the Bulletin have been made possible in part by a generous donation from Mrs. Kelvin Smith. An ambitious schedule of lectures, films, and special events, summarized on the enclosed card, accompanies the exhibition. The exhibition and all programs are free.

Running nearly concurrently (October 4-December 11) is Autumn Grasses: Art of the Momoyama Period 1573-1615, paintings and decorative objects drawn from the Museum collection. It, too, is free, and part of the Asian Autumns exhibition program scheduled each fall by the Department of Asian Art.

For additional information, photographs, color slides, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland OH 44106; 216/421-7340.